Small Islands Big Issues

Press Release

Paradise in Peril: United Nations Conference on Small Islands to Seek Strategy for Sustainable Development

Earth Summit commitments on financing sought

Small island countries will take the centre of the international stage when representatives of some 100 Governments gather in Bridgetown, Barbados, from 25 April to 6 May 1994. At the United Nations Global Conference on the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States, Governments will seek agreement on a plan for how small islai ds can survive growing environment and development problems —and on how to finance such a plan.

The Conference was called for at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, in recognition of the special vulnerabilities of small island States. It is seen as the first test of the "global partnership" formed at the Summit, by which rich and poor countries agreed to work together to reverse the environmental degradation of the planet.

Islands have long conjured up images of "paradise", but their azure lagoons, coral reefs and lush rain forests are showing signs of increasing stress. As island societies strive to raise living standards for growing populations and struggle to find their place in a complex global economy, they often sacrifice the fragile ecosystems which are among their most valuable assets. International assistance is needed to help islands reverse this trend.

Concerted global action is also required to prevent another alarming scenario: rising sea levels and climate change, predicted to result primarily from greenhouse gas emissions in indusrialized countries, could damage coastal areas and even submerge some low-lying islands.

To address these problems, Governments have been negotiating a Programme of Action to be adopted in Barbados. Most elements of this plan have been agreed upon. However, at the close of the final round of pre-Conference negotiations, held from 7 to 11 March in New York, key questions of how to provide the finance and environmentally sound technology to implement the plan remained unresolved. A Barbados Declaration, setting out political principles, is also yet to be finalized. The Conference is expected to draw a number of Heads of State, especially during its high-level segment on 5 and 6 May.

Ambassador Penelope Wensley of Australia, who chaired the negotiations on the Programme of Action in the Preparatory

Committee, commented that "we are going to Barbados with some brackets" (referring to disputed sections of the draft text), but that she was confident that differences could be worked out at the Conference itself.

Among the most contentious issues, she said, is whether international financing to support sustainable development in small islands would be limited to existing resources, as many donor countries wished. Small island countries hope that "new and additional" financing will be recommended.

At the Earth Summit, donor countries agreed that new and additional assistance would be necessary for developing countries to implement sustainable development policies—that is, development that meets present needs without jeopardizing the welfare of future generations by undermining the environment on which all life depends. Small island States point out that poverty, poor terms of trade and external debt often oblige them, like many other developing countries, to overexploit their natural resources and pollute their environment.

The Barbados meeting, according to Mr. Nitin Desai, Secretary-General of the Conference, will be a test case of the international response to the challenges of sustainable development, and the first clear, practical consequence of the "spirit of Rio".

Global Importance

Ensuring sustainable development in small islands would serve global as well as island interests. Improving small islands' ability to manage their marine resources would help stem the decline in fish supplies worldwide, now reaching crisis proportions. In the Pacific, small island States are "stewards"of some 30 million sq km of ocean—one sixth of the Earth's surface—the total of their 200-mile offshore exclusive economic zones. Most of the world's tuna, for example, is caught there.

Small islands are also important contributors to global biodiversity: their tropical forests and coral reefs are home to many species not found elsewhere, but these habitats are suffering considerable damage and, in the case of native endangered species, potentially irreversible losses.

Special Vulnerabilities

The Barbados Conference was called for in Agenda 21, the comprehensive global plan of action adopted at the Earth Summit, in recognition that small islands required special international attention because of their ecological and economic vulnerabilities:

- Global climate change is predicted to cause a rise in sea levels that would profoundly affect island economies, with a negative impact on fisheries, tourism, coral reefs and freshwater supplies;

- Natural disasters such as hurricanes and cyclones —already devastating to island societies—are projected to increase in frequency and intensity because of climate change;

- Fragile island economies—heavily dependent on imports, with exports often limited to one or two commodities—are subject to external shocks and fluctuations in the world market. The isolation and small scale of island economies make it difficult to attract investment or to diversify;

- Increasing development is putting pressure on scarce land, freshwater and energy resources and destroying the balance of vulnerable ecosystems.

Expected Outcomes

The Programme of Action under negotiation for adoption at the Global Conference outlines problems and presents recommendations in 15 key areas. Specific proposals call for:

- National and regional disaster emergency funds, from both public and private sectors, to help small islands recover from natural disasters and to provide hard-to-obtain insurance coverage;

- Regional Sustainable Development Centres, to provide research and training on technology options for small islands;

- A Small Island Developing States Technical Assistance Programme (SIDS/TAP) that would pool indigenous expertise; and

- A Small Island Developing States Information Network (SIDS/NET) to facilitate exchange of information on various aspects of sustainable development.

Political Realities

Underlying the discussions are the political and economic realities faced by both island countries and their traditional donor partners. International assistance, on which many islands depend, has been shrinking, as recession-hit industrialized countries cut back on foreign-aid budgets to focus on pressing domestic priorities. Small island States find they must compete for funds with crisis-torn countries worldwide, at a time when their strategic value has diminished in the post–cold war era.

Working against the small islands is the fact that donor Governments and international lending institutions often use per capita income as a measure of need, and by this yardstick small islands are seemingly better off than many other developing countries. For small island developing countries with populations of less than one million, average per capita income in 1991 was $US 4,117. For developing countries as a whole the figure was $1,000, and for the poorest, "least developed" countries, it was just $234.

Small island countries argue that because of their special vulnerabilities and limitations, per capita income does not accurately reflect their circumstances. Among the proposals in the Programme of Action is the development of a "vulnerability index" that would complement more traditional economic and social indicators.

As a political bloc, small islands began gathering strength in 1991 during the negotiations for a Framework Convention on Climate Change, when the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) pushed for urgent action to combat global warming. Now chaired by Ambassador Annette des Isles of Trinidad and Tobago, the 41-member AOSIS has been the major voice for island concerns leading up to Barbados.

Eminent Persons Group

The Governor General of Barbados, Dame Nita Barrow, will host a meeting of an "Eminent Persons Group" of international dignitaries in Barbados on 21-22 April. The group will make recommendations and suggest innovative measures to mobilize international support for small islands. Their proposals will be formally presented to the Global Conference.

NGO Participation and Events

Over 200 non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are expected to play an important role as observers at the Conference and its preparatory meetings. Among these are many community island groups, as well as regional and international organizations.

At the time of the Global Conference, a number of parallel events will be held, including an NGO Islands Forum, featuring lectures and workshops, and a Village of Hope, portraying island themes. The organizers can be contacted at: NGO Liaison Committee Secretariat, Letchworth Office Complex, The Garrison, St. Michael, Barbados, telephone (809) 435-2995, fax (809) 435-0884.

SUSTECH '94, an exhibit showcasing sustainable technologies with particular applicability to small islands, is being organized by the Barbados Manufacturers' Association, Building 1, Pelican Industrial Park, St. Michael, Barbados, telephone (809) 426-4474, fax (809) 436-5182.

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